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PATH TO EXCELLENCE: A NARRATOLOGY OF A TOPNOTCHER IN THE NATIONAL QUALIFYING EXAM FOR SCHOOL HEADS

Charyl Denesse B. Carcallas, LPT[1], Jeanilyn T. Muico, Ph.D[2]
Master of Arts in Education major in Educational Management, St. Mary's College of Tagum, Inc.
Graduate School Department, National Highway, Tagum City, 8100, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived story of a topnotcher in the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) from the Division of Panabo City, Davao del Norte. Employing a qualitative narratological approach, the research examined the subject's testing environment, positive and negative experiences, and key insights and recommendations drawn from her journey as a high-performing NQESH examinee. The participant was purposively selected as one of the top performers in the most recent NQESH, demonstrating exceptional academic achievement, mastery of the required competencies, and a willingness to participate in the study. She provided rich and detailed narratives of her preparation strategies, examination experiences, and reflective insights, clearly articulating the methods she employed in studying for and preparing for the examination. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, allowing the participant to share her personal stories in depth.

Findings revealed that achieving topnotcher status in the NQESH is accompanied by significant dilemmas and challenges before and during the examination. Her narratives highlighted the difficulties of intensive preparation while simultaneously managing personal responsibilities and the demands of serving as a school head. Despite these challenges, she demonstrated effective time management, reliance on support systems, and the practice of self-care strategies to balance her roles as an aspiring school head and a parent. These experiences significantly shaped her leadership approach, fostering compassion, resilience, and innovation in school leadership. Overall, the study holds important implications for educational policy, leadership development, and instructional practices within the Department of Education (DepEd), extending beyond examination preparation to inform the broader ecosystem of school leadership.

KEYWORDS: *Educational Management, Qualifying Exam, School Heads, Topnotcher, Narratology, Panabo City, Davao Del Norte*

INTRODUCTION

The National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) is required of all prospective principal candidates in all public schools nationwide. This test is crucial for selecting and hiring school principals because it provides a clear picture of their leadership and management skills, two of the most important tasks they must perform as instructional leaders and administrative managers. Unfortunately, passing the NQESH can be a goal many people find challenging. It is evident how difficult and complex the NQESH is from the high percentage of school administrators who fail it each year. However, this led some of them to decide not to attempt and to quit (Psychology & Education, 2024).

The issue with the main selection in Turkey is that new regulations are added virtually annually, making it difficult to implement existing ones. Inconsistent policies result from some of these rules failing to align with the National Education Council's objectives. Stakeholder confusion and criticism have resulted from this frequent changing, and fewer passes have shown how inconsistent the principal selection process is (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2021). Only one out of every eight applicants in Singapore is selected following a demanding application procedure that includes difficult tests, panel interviews, and thorough evaluations of their contributions. Although this guarantees high standards, it also prevents more gifted teachers from advancing to leadership positions in schools. Although these stringent requirements ensure high standards, they also pose a major obstacle, making it difficult for many applicants to pass and reducing the number of eligible school administrators (Sergiovanni, 2019).

According to a 2019 study by Cabrera and Corpuz, candidates in the Philippines should have more service experience before taking the NQESH. The responsible teachers have the best chance of passing the test. Enrolling in graduate programs, attending management and leadership training and seminars, and allocating sufficient time each day to read management-related literature and potential exam topics all increase the likelihood of success.

Additionally, Galleposo (2021) found that school leaders need to acquire and develop a theoretical understanding of the

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NCBS-SH competences, their significance, and their applications to support them in enhancing, upgrading, and amplifying their talents in managing an institution. To address the NQESH, one also needs higher-order thinking skills and active professional development. Moreover, teachers in the Philippines often face challenges when taking the NQESH to become school heads, including: lack of adequate preparation and training opportunities, outdated curriculum content, heavy teaching workload, limited access to review materials, exam anxiety, pressure to perform well, and concerns about the exam format and scoring system; all contributing to potential difficulties in demonstrating the necessary leadership skills and knowledge required for the role (Lagrio et al., 2022).

In the Department of Education in Panabo Division, it was observed that many school heads may have taken the NQESH annually, though only a handful succeeded. In the NQESH 2023, there were 25 test-takers in the Panabo division, but only 14 passed the exam, while others passed after taking it three or more times. Additionally, the Division of Panabo City claimed that the annual passing rate offers a true understanding of how tough and demanding the NQESH really is. Consequently, it shows that there is something every aspirant needs to succeed in the exam, and shortly after, principals need to do and absorb to be elevated to the job they want.

As a result, several studies have examined the National Qualifying Exams for School Heads. Some of these studies have even examined NQESH and its relationship to other variables, such as Performance in the NQESH (Ceralde, 2014) and Self-Efficacy and Motivation of School Heads in Region VIII (Lacanaria, 2024). The researcher, however, came across little literature that focused on the one narratology study of a school head who scored highly on the National Qualifying Exams. However, the researcher encountered limited literature on the subject's environment, positive and negative experiences, and important recommendations from top NQESH exam scorers. Additionally, this study would offer pertinent ideas that would be developed in the academic community to evaluate the exam-taking proficiency of school leaders. Therefore, this study on the difficulties school heads face in preparing for the exam must be conducted immediately.

This narratology has significant social value, as it benefits not only aspiring school heads but also the Department of Education by providing empirical data to refine leadership development programs, optimize selection processes, and ultimately improve school performance. This narratological study demonstrates significant social and institutional value by capturing the lived experiences of a topnotcher in the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH). Its findings offer meaningful insights for aspiring school heads and for the Department of Education (DepEd), particularly in refining leadership development initiatives and strengthening selection and assessment processes. By foregrounding the narrative of a high-performing examinee, the study identifies effective preparation strategies, coping mechanisms, and meaning-making practices that shape success in qualifying examinations. These insights highlight the need for school administrators to be more deliberately supported and engaged in structured study and review programs. Ultimately, the study contributes to the development of more responsive policies and support systems that enhance examination readiness, leadership capacity, and overall school performance.

Moreover, once the study results are gathered, they will be disseminated to the academic institutions for them to craft a policy supporting aspiring school heads and enhancing their chances of passing the NQESH. This study will provide aspiring school heads with the knowledge they need to design strategies and techniques to review and study more effectively and efficiently for the qualifying examination. Further, the findings of the study are planned to be disseminated through a learning action cell (LAC) session in primary and secondary schools. Also, the researcher will volunteer to share the study's results at any institutional meeting, seminar, training, or workshop. In addition, the researcher commits to presenting the study's findings at national and international fora. Furthermore, to increase the study's accessibility, the researcher hopes to publish in an online journal.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Narratology is used in this qualitative investigation. When researchers aim to gather data based on human perceptions and understanding, qualitative approaches prove most helpful (Stake, 2010). Rather than quantifying numerical data, qualitative research aims to uncover the quality and themes of responses or data (Creswell, 2013). To comprehend and explain social phenomena, qualitative data—such as participant observation, documents, and interviews—are used (Qualitative Research Consultants Association, 2015). The motivation for using qualitative approaches to enhance understanding stems from the desire to comprehend a perception or occurrence (Stake, 2010).

Qualitative research is an appropriate design for exploring the case of a topnotcher in the National Qualifying Exam for School Heads (NQESH), as it allows an in-depth understanding of the individual's experiences, motivations, and strategies. It provides a nuanced view of the participant's journey, including the personal, emotional, and contextual factors that contributed to her success. This method enables the researcher to capture the richness of the participant's unique perspective and to develop a broader, more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and experiences involved in excelling at such a demanding exam. By focusing on the narratology of a top performer, qualitative research reveals insights into the preparation process, personal qualities, and external influences that contributed to exceptional performance. This approach facilitates a deeper interpretation of the phenomenon and its broader implications for educational leadership and exam preparation strategies.

Overall, this qualitative narratology study aimed to identify and analyze the best practices employed by a topnotcher in successfully passing and excelling in the National Qualifying Exam for School Heads (NQESH). The study employed a multifaceted research approach, focusing primarily on face-to-

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face in-depth interviews with the topnotcher (subject) and key informants with direct knowledge of the individual's preparation and experience. These interviews served as the foundation for gathering rich, detailed accounts of the strategies, methods, and attitudes that contributed to the topnotcher's success.

Research Participants

According to Koenig (2017), the researcher must choose participants who are appropriate for the study's features, as qualitative research focuses on closely examining human perspectives, emotions, and behavior. Purposive sampling, as advocated by Polkinghorne (2005), was used in this investigation. Since the participant was chosen for their exposure and desire to share their experiences, the researcher was able to obtain valuable information from them.

Since the study focuses on a topnotcher in the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH), the selection criteria are based on several key factors. First, the subject is among the top performers in the most recent NQESH, demonstrating exceptional academic achievement and mastery of the required competencies. Second, the subject is willing to participate in the study and provides detailed accounts of preparation strategies, examination experiences, and reflective insights. In addition, the candidate demonstrates a clear ability to articulate the methods used in studying and preparing for the examination, as well as the challenges encountered and the strategies employed to overcome them.

Ideally, the subject has been recognized by peers or educational institutions for outstanding performance, further validating topnotcher status. Lastly, the individual is available for multiple in-depth interviews and willing to share relevant documents, materials, or other resources that contribute to success, enabling comprehensive data collection and analysis. This selection process ensures that the study captures a rich, informative narrative that offers valuable insights for other NQESH aspirants and that the chosen participant meets the study's qualifications.

For this study, the exclusion criteria do not include professional experience or possession of an advanced degree, as these factors do not affect candidacy.

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the discussions and conclusions drawn from the subject's narratives, emphasizing how her lived experience as a top-scoring NQESH taker illuminates the demands of school leadership and high-stakes assessment.

Subject's Description of the Environment in Taking the National Qualifying Exam for School Heads. The participant's description of the environment during the NQESH included how she utilized the virtual space for its efficiency, accessibility, and ability to connect with broader resources. She further described how the test was administered virtually and the specific assessment solutions used to facilitate the exam.

This can be linked to a study that stated that the NQESH's degree of difficulty is not exclusive to the Philippines. The Principal Certification Examination (PCE) in Canada, the School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA) in the United States, the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) in England, and the School Leadership Assessment (SLA) in Singapore are just a few of the comparable tests or evaluations used in many other nations to choose and appoint school leaders (Nguyen & Williams, 2019). The demanding, complex functions and responsibilities of school leaders in the twenty-first century are reflected in the stringent requirements and criteria of these exams or assessments. Additionally, they require applicants to demonstrate expertise across a range of areas related to school leadership, including staff development, curriculum and instruction, school improvement, school vision and mission, and goals. By situating her experience within this broader global landscape, her narrative underscores that the NQESH functions not only as a qualifying exam but also as an entry point into the demanding role of twenty-first-century school leadership.

At the psychological level, her narrative of pressure and self-monitoring resonates with studies on high-stakes examinations. For example, a study conducted at Indiana University of Pennsylvania in the United States attempted to understand the lived experiences of Graduate Nurses (GNS) who failed multiple National Council Licensure Examination-Registered Nurse (NCLEX-RN) exams. Silva (2020) found that a theme contributing to these failures was the pathological fear of examination. When the examination was mentioned, some pupils became quite anxious. In the examination room, a few even passed out. They experienced examination phobia, a condition brought on by anxiety during a test. An individual who experiences fear loses the ability to comprehend what he reads and to recall previously acquired information. It often occurs due to inadequate preparation and poor planning for the test. The other themes—blaming, loneliness, and the need for help and support—were equally significant.

Al-Zoubi and Younes (2020) conducted another study in Jordan that examined parents' and teachers' perspectives to identify the reasons behind low test scores and poor educational attainment. They noted that emotional and psychological issues, such as financial concerns, family issues, and physical stress, had a major impact on students' exam performance. They also discovered that exam performance was significantly impacted by test anxiety. People can suffer from test anxiety when they are taking an exam. It results from a fear of failing the test. This feeling has the potential to impair a person's mental health, making it difficult for them to focus and retain fundamental information that is necessary for responding to inquiries. These disruptions stem from a person's anxiety about not getting promoted and fear that failing the test will impact their social life. In the participant's narrative, related anxieties surfaced in her fear of underperforming in a highly surveilled online environment; however, she narrated how she managed these emotions by strengthening her preparation and seeking support from family and colleagues.

Throughout her story, the subject described the NQESH as both a source of enhanced learning and a trigger for intense stress.

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On one hand, she described the review period as an opportunity to synthesize scattered knowledge about policies, standards, and legal frameworks into a coherent mental model of effective school leadership. On the other hand, she recalled episodes of exhaustion, anxiety, and fear of underperforming, especially when technical issues and strict surveillance disrupted her concentration.

In today's context, principals must balance managerial, political, and instructional responsibilities while responding to new initiatives and heightened accountability (Cuban, 2019). They are often positioned as site-based managers who must mobilize financial and human resources and foster collaborative learning communities among teachers and staff (Olson, 2020). The subject's narrative of preparing for and taking the NQESH points to how these expectations begin even before appointment, as aspiring principals are tested not only on knowledge but also on their capacity to handle pressures and complex leadership tasks.

Norwegian schools have long been impacted by assessment for learning methods, and teachers, school administrators, and national authorities have been creating assessment procedures that enhance and support students' learning (Hopfenbeck et al., 2020). Instructional leadership has become the standard in Norway, where school administrators are mandated by law to establish and promote professional learning communities focused on school-level assessment procedures (Ministry of Education, 2019).

On the other hand, building assessment capacity in schools is a crucial responsibility for school administrators to support teachers' knowledge and abilities and to modify and enhance instructional strategies (Charteris & Smardon, 2021; Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2020; Wyatt-Smith et al., 2019). Additionally, several studies indicate that the extent to which school leaders' professional development and assessment skills translate into classroom practices that promote learning depends heavily on their competence and capacity in these areas (Hopfenbeck et al., 2020; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2019; Charteris & Smardon, 2021). The learning environment also includes the psychological dimension, within which the participant described how she kept herself resilient against the inevitable stress and setbacks of a high-stakes exam. She shared that she drew on her psychosocial resilience to remain steady in the study context, treating each challenge in the testing environment as something to understand and overcome.

Furthermore, being a leader requires the flexibility to adapt long-standing customs and procedures. The theory of organizational routines provides a framework for understanding routines as dynamic, ever-evolving, and essential to organizational learning (Feldman & Pentland, 2023). Routines are an essential part of organizational learning because they encode organizational capacities and knowledge, as Feldman and Pentland (2023) claim. Their approach focuses on how organizational routines interact with change and stability. The flexibility and adaptability of routines are also influenced by subjectivity, agency, and power.

Spillane et al. (2021) investigated the role of organizational routines in schools, particularly during periods of major transition. They discovered that teachers were more inclined to incorporate routines into their practice when they held significance for them, leading to beneficial adjustments and enhancements in both teaching and learning. Once established, these practices served as organizational memory, providing consistency despite staff turnover (Miner et al., 2019). Miner's study further emphasized the significance of both bureaucratic and cooperative efforts in the planning and redesign of routines by teachers and school administrators. School administrators created organizational routines that had a noticeable impact on classrooms, serving as a catalyst for change and progress throughout the school.

On the other hand, the learning environment is inclusive of the psychological environment, in which the participant described how she managed to keep it robust against the inevitable stress and setbacks of a high-stakes exam. She further shared that she was able to draw on her psychosocial resilience within the study context. Ma'am Tibay's account of managing her own psychological environment—keeping herself resilient amid surveillance, time pressure, and technical constraints—adds a narrative layer to these findings by showing how such leadership capacities are first tested in the examinee's own life.

Furthermore, in April 2009, D.O. No. 36 (2009) was published, which stipulates that passing the NQEP is a requirement for appointment as a school principal. The standard qualifications of the applicants for the examination were detailed, including years of experience and position. Only one person from Zamboanga Sibugay Division passed the exam, which was administered in November 2009, according to the results (McFarquhar, 2016). The Department of Education issued a D in an effort to become globally competitive and to supply the country with capable educational leaders. The National Competency-Based requirements for School Heads (NCBS-SH), which establish performance requirements for school heads to guarantee they will perform to the best of their abilities, were adopted nationally.

This order was accompanied by a significant modification to the NQEP. The National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) was the new designation for it. NEAP simplified the test by focusing exclusively on the seven NCBS-SH domains and omitting reading comprehension and English language competency (D.M. No. 140, 2009)—the condensed exam comprised 200 items based on these domains. The NCBH-SH's seven domains were grouped into three clusters in 2017, and in order to pass the test, a candidate must receive at least 70% in each cluster, as stated in D. M. No. 93 (2018). The NQESH has remained the most difficult barrier to becoming a school principal since 2010.

Unquestionably, the idea that school principal performance is the primary determinant of school achievement served as the foundation for the NQESH. All prospective candidates for the Principal and Assistant Principal posts in all public elementary and secondary schools must pass the NQESH in order to be appointed and reclassified (DepEd Memorandum No. 025, s.

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2023). Successful school administrators take the lead in establishing and sharing the school's vision with stakeholders, teachers, and students, as well as motivating and assisting them in realizing it (Wang & Degol, 2020).

Lastly, policy developments in the Philippines have gradually formalized the link between principalship and qualifying examinations. Department Orders and memoranda on the NQEP and later the NQESH define eligibility, competency domains, and passing standards for aspiring school heads. Against this policy backdrop, the subject's narrative offers an inside view of what it means to face the NQESH as the most significant barrier to becoming a school principal, and how one educator from Panabo City chose to overcome it through persistence, preparation, and faith.

Subject's Positive and Negative Experiences in the National Qualifying Exam for School Heads (NQESH). One of the participant's positive experiences in the NQESH was the attainment of enhanced learning and performance. According to her, the rigorous review required her to move beyond a surface-level understanding of educational theories, policies (such as various DepEd Orders and issuances), and legal frameworks. The experience provided her with an unparalleled opportunity to synthesize complex information, transforming scattered facts into a cohesive mental model of effective school leadership.

Every public elementary and secondary school in the nation is required by Republic Act No. 9155 to be run by a school head who is in charge of the institution's finances, curriculum implementation, physical facility upkeep and improvement, and program innovations (Galleposo, 2020). To address this, the Department of Education (DepEd) issued DepEd Order No. 42 (2007), which updated the selection criteria for school head positions. The directive outlined the range of leadership qualities, including strategic, people, and educational leadership, that a school head must have. RA 9155 defines educational leadership as the capacity of school administrators to create policies and initiatives that ensure the implementation of the curriculum. The subject's account of stretching her understanding during NQESH preparation reflects how she was already beginning to inhabit these expectations narratively, imagining herself as the kind of leader envisioned in RA 9155 and related policies.

However, her narrative also acknowledges that passing a qualification exam and being promoted to principal do not automatically ensure effective school leadership. According to Capangpangan (2020), school administrators face a number of challenges in their daily work, particularly when implementing policies and plans. Others have expressed dissatisfaction with the challenges they encountered in managing and operating schools and in establishing connections with the community. Although they were proficient in human resource management, the other principals lacked the skills to create a learning environment focused on students' needs. Although in-service management training offers principals a capacity-building program, the training itself does not adequately enhance their competencies in certain areas.

The participant also reiterated that her negative experience included having intense stress and anxiety. A variety of factors brought about the stress and anxiety: she further expressed that the fear of underperforming translated into test anxiety during mock exams or the actual NQESH. She stated that it caused her to "freeze up," leading her to forget information they knew perfectly well, and thus failing to translate their preparation into actual scores. Her story resonates with research showing that heavy workloads, time constraints, and insufficient opportunities for collegial reflection can undermine even highly motivated educators, leaving them to rely on professionalism while receiving limited instructional monitoring or technical support from their school heads.

Additionally, the teachers felt trusted to do their duties and acknowledged as experts. This assumption made it evident that the instructors' view of the head of the school's duties was not centered on instruction and learning (Aureada, 2021). The participant's account of struggling with stress while aspiring to a leadership role hints at the tension between these ideal expectations and the lived realities of educators preparing for high-stakes exams while also navigating complex school contexts.

According to the Fernet et al. (2020) study, principals should be aware that a positive school climate is essential to addressing school difficulties in developing a student-centered learning atmosphere. It improves school atmosphere through an auto-technological approach backed by private journals and revolutionary leadership styles. Teachers can be inspired to do their best work by the principal's transformative leadership style and direction, which incorporates feedback from staff, pupils, and teachers.

It is the duty of principals, as leaders, to steer the school toward improved teaching and learning in the framework of managing learning policies and school atmosphere—the five primary duties of leaders in fostering a positive school environment. The school climate was impacted by the principal's engagement and school culture (Ferrel, 2021). As a result, the principal's duties as a leader include: first, creating a vision for every student's academic success. Effective principals are tasked with creating a school commitment vision that prioritizes high standards and the achievement of every student, even though they express this in diverse ways.

The principal has the authority to serve as the administrator, and professional development and human resource management are two other crucial administrative responsibilities in schools. As human resource managers, school principals typically oversee instruction, run the school, communicate with the outside world, and maintain relationships with the community. Ordering supplies, ensuring teachers are hired and assigned, gathering data, and keeping simple records are among these duties. It is considered the primary set of duties in many schools. One of the principal's main responsibilities is to complete the reports required by the school service commission (Obi & Nwabuogookoye, 2020).

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The study by Torlak et al. (2021) in the field of school management operations demonstrated that efficient and effective management is necessary for the organization. While efficiency is demonstrated when a task is completed perfectly, practicality is demonstrated when a specific activity is carried out correctly. Through the efforts of workers who work together to accomplish the desired goal, management brings an organization's vision, mission, and goals to life. To produce results, management is necessary in all organizations, including educational institutions. Leaders can make decisions on their own about the operational structure of their businesses, organizations, or institutions, or they can have total authority over decisions that affect others' futures.

Her narrative aligns with findings that principals must simultaneously manage teaching and learning, human resources, community relationships, and accountability demands. As she told her story, she implicitly positioned the NQESH not only as a test of knowledge but as a rehearsal for the multifaceted responsibilities of the principalship, where decisions about time, attention, and emotional energy are constantly required.

In addition, research on exam anxiety provides a useful lens for understanding the emotional contours of her story. Vaz et al. (2019) in a few Indian universities show that the learning process can shape test anxiety, expectations of results, the testing environment, and even technical issues in exam administration. In a similar vein, Baker-Doyle and Petchauer (2020) found that test anxiety was a predictor of exam achievement in Canada. According to their findings, those who are highly self-assured, have a high degree of independence, and have worked hard to become experts have a good chance of passing a test. The participant’s experiences of pressure, time awareness, and fear of not converting preparation into scores mirror these findings, yet her narrative also highlights how determination, faith, and reflective practice helped her move through these challenges rather than be defined by them.

Additionally, Sadiq and Saeed's (2022) study in Lahore, Pakistan, found that the testing environment had a significant impact on test-takers' exam scores. The physical state of the testing room, including its poor ventilation and lighting, demoralized the students, according to the study. The study also found that typographical problems in the test materials increased tension among test takers and that the way the exam was administered upset them.

Moreover, a study by Allaga and Pachejo (2021) at Rizal Technological University found that some students sobbed when they left exam locations due to time constraints. They frequently grumbled about the lack of time. Since many other test-takers who studied for the test had completed it early and given themselves enough time to review their responses, the researchers reasoned that the statement was not generally true.

Taken together, her positive and negative experiences form a narrative arc in which enhanced learning, policy-based understanding, and emerging leadership identity are constantly negotiated against stress, anxiety, and structural constraints. This arc illustrates that for her, the NQESH was not merely an assessment event but a formative episode in her ongoing story as a school leader in the making.

Important Recommendations that can be Shared with Other Aspiring Takers. In the latter part of her story, the participant turned her experiences into concrete advice for other aspiring NQESH takers. She emphasized that candidates should prioritize official DepEd memoranda, service marks, and issuances over third-party review materials, because the exam primarily tests official policy language and frameworks, which she believes are essential to "acing" the NQESH.

From her point of view, this emphasis on official issuances is inseparable from her understanding of school leadership itself. As she narrated her journey, she consistently pictured the school head as someone who uses the school's resources, such as time, people, funds, and information, to help the school reach and sustain high performance levels. This image aligns with the literature that describes that, as a leader and manager, the head of the school is expected to possess the knowledge, abilities, and skills necessary to support the success of every student by overseeing the operations, resources, and organization of the school in a way that fosters a secure, productive, and successful learning environment. Kadir (2019) asserts that achieving educational objectives depends on the availability and management of resources, accountability, and democratic decision-making (good governance). According to Nidadhavolu (2019), leaders should inspire and drive their staff to achieve extraordinary results to ensure work happiness and organizational dedication. In this sense, her recommendation to focus on official policies is not just a test-taking tip; it reflects her belief that knowing DepEd's rules and standards by heart is part of being a responsible and effective leader.

Furthermore, the participant’s narrative resonates with scholars who argue that school heads must be authentic instructional leaders who keep teaching and learning at the center of their work. According to Soroñoa and Quirap (2022), school heads need to be authentic instructional leaders who maintain their focus on teaching and learning. It is impossible to reform schools without the involvement and assistance of school administrators. The school heads are responsible for the challenge of bringing about change within the school community. To ensure that students' learning continues to progress, these adjustments are essential for the school's growth and teachers' instructional development. The main responsibility of school leaders in this cycle is to establish best practices that eventually lead to higher academic achievement. She acknowledged that real school reform is impossible without the involvement and support of administrators who are willing to lead change within the school community, even when it is uncomfortable. Drawing on her experience, she urges aspiring takers to see their current roles, whether as teachers, coordinators, or head teachers, as training grounds where they can already start small reforms, mentor colleagues, and model best practices, so that when these situations arise in the NQESH, they will not feel entirely new.

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When asked directly about what helped her top the exam, the participant narrated several specific approaches that she considered her "weapons" in the NQESH. Among other things, she emphasized the need to stay focused and to engage in practice tests consistently. She described her review plan as iterative and self-correcting: after each mock exam, she would immediately analyze which items she missed, identify the policy or concept behind those questions, and adjust her next study session to address those exact gaps. In her view, using practice exams in this way—less as a scorecard and more as a diagnostic tool—allowed her to take full ownership of her learning and to target her weaknesses with precision.

She also contextualized these recommendations within the broader reality of the NQESH as a mandatory and demanding gateway to school leadership positions. In her narrative, passing the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH), often known as the Principal's Test, is mandatory for all aspiring applicants for principal positions in public institutions across the country. This examination is critical to the selection and hiring of school principals because it provides a precise indication of their leadership and management competence, two of the most significant functions they need to take on as instructional leaders and administrative managers. Unfortunately, becoming an NQESH passer may not be an easy feat for many. The high number of school leaders who fail to pass the NQESH each year speaks volumes about the test's complexity and difficulty. This, however, compelled some of them to turn their backs and choose not to try again. Nonetheless, other school principals took the exam multiple times without giving up hope, finally succeeding on their third or fourth try (Ibañez & Salmon, 2024). Rather than discouraging future takers, she used these facts to stress the importance of persistence and to encourage those who might fail initially to view each attempt as part of a longer professional journey.

Her recommendations are supported by studies showing that candidates who eventually pass the NQESH often have substantial service experience, particularly in roles such as teacher-in-charge or head teacher, and who invest time in management-related reading, graduate studies, and participation in leadership seminars and training. For example, in the Philippines, the study of Cabrera and Corpuz (2019) revealed that before taking the NQESH, candidates should gain more service experience. The teachers in charge are most likely to pass the exam. Allotting ample time each day to study management-related books and prospective exam themes, enrolling in graduate studies, and attending management and leadership seminars and training increases the likelihood of success. Further, Galleposo (2021) found that to help school leaders augment, upgrade, and amplify their abilities in managing an institution, they must acquire and establish theoretical knowledge of the NCBS-SH competencies and their meaningful relevance and applications. She reinforced these findings by advising aspirants to gain as much hands-on leadership experience as possible before taking the exam—volunteering for committee work, leading school projects, and attending capacity-building activities that deepen their understanding of the NCBS-SH competencies and their practical applications.

Finally, according to the participant, dynamic professional development, as well as higher-order thinking skills, are required to ace the NQESH. In this connection, several valuable studies have been conducted on the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads. For instance, Galliposo (2020) found that the performance of the NQESH is significantly influenced by skills, effort, physical condition, and background in the NCBS-SH domains, as well as by external variables such as luck and task complexity. Comparatively, Orsos (2019) found that the majority of NQESH takers were school personnel, including head teachers, aged 41-50, who had earned master's degrees. Also, they had sufficient administrative experience, which increased their chances of participating in numerous training and seminars. Apart from this, Cabrera and Corpuz (2019) revealed that the years of service, position, wages, and the number of times taking the NQESH were the prominent factors in achieving success in taking the NQESH. In her story, these elements came together over years of service, multiple leadership roles, repeated training engagement, and a disciplined review routine anchored in official DepEd documents—an integrated preparation that she now offers as a narrative blueprint for those who wish to follow her path.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The narratives in this study collectively portrayed the subject's testing environment, her positive and negative experiences, and the recommendations she offers as a top-scoring NQESH taker. Taken together, her story shows how she drew on personal qualities such as perseverance, organization, and faith to use different environmental factors to her advantage and eventually succeed in the exam.

The results of the study suggested that the negative experiences of the participant should be taken into consideration and should also be addressed immediately. Experiencing intense stress and anxiety, and the ability to manage expectations and pressure are the major factors that should be looked into, as this plays a key role in aspiring test-takers' ability to be successful in the NQESH. One of the major difficulties or negative experiences that was highlighted was intense stress and anxiety brought about by the environment during the NQESH, which was conducted virtually. Sustained, intense stress often results in physical exhaustion (sleep loss, headaches) and emotional volatility (irritability, mood swings). This intense stress and anxiety diminish the quality of their study time, making the entire preparation process feel punitive and unsustainable.

At the same time, her story highlighted how the help of her superiors, family, and co-workers has helped the participant excel in taking the NQESH. Her narrative also points to the importance of deliberate preparation: knowing what to study, how to study, and how to balance professional duties with personal responsibilities all contributed to her eventual success in the exam.

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Furthermore, the participant's experience suggests that it is greatly recommended to be acquainted with the environment wherein the exam should take place, be it virtually or physically, in order for aspiring test-takers to feel more comfortable with their surroundings and increase their risk of passing and acing the NQESH. The government may strengthen the opportunity of test-takers to attend reviews and other activities that would widen their knowledge in taking the qualifying exam.

In addition, her emphasis on studying official DepEd issuances and standards implies that institutional support should include clear, updated, and accessible review resources. The Department of Education could strengthen practice by publishing official, comprehensive review modules or an online syllabus aligned with the current NQESH table of specifications and by maintaining an open repository of relevant DepEd Orders, memoranda, laws, and related studies that are likely to be tested. These measures would allow aspiring takers to anchor their preparation, as she did, on correct and authoritative sources rather than fragmented or outdated materials.

Finally, fellow principals, as experienced school heads, can significantly help NQESH (National Qualifying Exam for School Heads) takers maximize their capacity to pass the exam by providing crucial mentorship, practical context, and psychosocial support. Their role is vital, especially since the exam tests the ability to apply leadership concepts in real-world scenarios. In addition, school heads who are already NQESH passers should act as subject-matter experts, leading focused discussions on the five domains of the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH). This involves going beyond surface-level content and clarifying complex policies like the financial management and legal frameworks.

CONCLUSIONS

This narratology study examined how a top-scoring NQESH test-taker from Panabo, Davao del Norte, narrated her testing environment, her positive and negative experiences, and the recommendations she offered to other aspiring school heads. Through her story, the researcher was able to grasp her distinctive challenges, coping strategies, and insights about taking and topping the NQESH, while recognizing that her narrative reflects one situated perspective rather than the experiences of all examinees.

The National Qualifying Examination for School Heads may still be one of the most difficult examinations that an individual may undergo in order to become a principal. It was revealed that the ability to manage intense stress and anxiety, and being able to manage expectations and pressure, influences a test-taker's capacity to pass the NQESH. Enhanced learning and performance, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance, also play a major role in a test-taker's capacity to ace the qualifying exam.

Since most researches are centered on the test-taker's capacity to pass the test, the researcher chose altered approaches in reflecting on the context of how a topnotcher in the NQESH was able to successfully pass through a narratology study. An in-depth interview was employed in gathering information on the subject's environment, positive and negative experiences, and important recommendations of a top-scoring NQESH test-taker through the responses of the participant. The transcription of the participants' audio-recorded responses served as the primary source of data for the study. The researcher expresses appreciation for the honesty of the informants and the participant, as well as for their valuable contributions to the study. .

Lastly, test-takers for the NQESH need full support, guidance, and support from their family, community, and co-workers for them to be able to successfully pass the exam. Finally, family members of NQESH test-takers should understand that they need to maximize their time in studying and preparing for the exam in order to increase their chances of passing, if not acing the exam.

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